

The South Danvers Observer

History of African Americans in South Danvers

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"It would be interesting to know the history of the black race as it existed here a century ago."

So stated Editor and Librarian Fitch Poole in the January 11, 1860 *South Danvers Wizard*. His subsequent musings on the history of slavery in his family and in the family of his friend, Warren Jacobs, offered only a hint at the true scope of slavery's influence in South Danvers.

Though South Danvers itself never held slave auctions, private sales were common enough. On April 30, 1754, Daniel Epes sold a four year old boy called Primus to Ebenezer Jacobs (1715-1793).

Sale of children were common in Massachusetts. New Englanders preferred children for two reasons—the low price and because they felt they would be easier to train. Occasionally, children were even given away.

Because slavery in New England was of a different nature than in the south, households generally had only one or two slaves. This sometimes brought about a closer relationship between master and slave, but it could also isolate the slave from others. Such isolation produced despair in some.

On July 27, 1741, the *Boston Evening Post* reported that "A Negro fellow belonging to Mr. Joseph Goldthwait [living in what was then

Salem] being in a Sullen Frame, went into the Barn and hanged himself."

His *Sullen Frame*, as described in the article, would no doubt be recognized today as Depression. Statistics for suicides of enslaved African Americans are impossible to determine, but it is not hard to imagine why this man, whose humanity was so ignored as to remain unnamed even in death, sought release in the only way available to him.

Just how many slaves there were in South Danvers in the 17th and 18th centuries is unknown. On average, though, slaves numbered about 2% of the white population in Massachusetts. However, when the first official census for the newly formed United States was taken in 1790, it stated 34 African Americans were still living in Danvers, most as servants. While the Massachusetts Supreme Court had ruled in 1781 and again in 1783 that two slaves who had appealed to the court were to be freed, thus setting the precedent to free any remaining slaves, slavery lingered for some years in the state, under the label of indentured servitude.

Though Fitch Poole viewed himself as an Abolitionist, equality between the races was

not something he either advocated or accepted. In the same 1860 article, he discussed his grandfather, William Pool's, purchase of two slaves, Milo and Caesar, at an auction in Boston in the mid-1700s.

The purchaser [William Pool] examined the human cattle, and as he did so, spit in their faces. Milo received the insult with a grin, and Caesar with a scowl.

This, according to Fitch Poole, indicated Milo's and Caesar's natures, one *tractable and amiable*, the other *reverse, crooked and unmanageable*. Even a staunch Abolitionist couldn't view them as men, one who could keep his emotions hidden behind a grin and one who couldn't. Most revealing of all, is how Poole went on to discuss Primus, the boy sold at the age of four to Ebenezer Jacobs. He stated that Primus lived to an advanced age and became free by the decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, but omitted the most important fact of all.

That, while still a slave, Primus Jacobs fought in the American Revolution.

**††† A Negro Child to be given away lately
Born in a Family where the Small-Pox hath not been,
nor is at present in the Neighbourhood, Inquire of the
Printer of this Paper.**

From the *Boston Gazette*
March 22, 1736

Primus Jacobs, 1750-1817

—Though Primus Jacobs was born in Massachusetts, neither his birth, nor the names of his parents, are recorded. The first mention of Primus is in 1754, when Daniel Epes sold him to Ebenezer Jacobs.

“Received of Mr. Ebenezer Jacobs of Danvers, the sum of Forty-Five Pounds, Six Shillings and Eight Pence Lawfull Money, which is in full, Satisfaction for a Negro Boy named Primus, which I have this day sold to ye s’d Jacobs.”

The next mention of Primus was on March 20, 1776, the day he married Dinah Smith. Just a year later, on March 21, 1777, he enlisted in the 11th Regiment in the Continental Army for three years. Sometimes such an enlistment guaranteed freedom for a slave. Sometimes not. Reports conflict as to whether Primus was freed upon his enlistment or later, when the war ended. If Ebenezer Jacobs (1715-1793) didn’t free Primus upon his enlistment, Jacobs would have been responsible for any financial support necessary for Primus during his service. This burden would have been offset by the bounty Jacobs would have received for Primus’ service in the army.

Many African Americans took up arms early in the war. However, in the summer of 1775 General Horatio Gates forbade the enlistment of “any deserter from the Ministerial army, nor any stroller, negro or vagabond” [Quayles. p.15]. When black soldiers protested, General Washington allowed black soldiers who had already served to re-enlist, but refused to accept any more African Americans into the army.

This changed with John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore’s proclamation in November 1775. Dunmore, the former governor of Virginia, stated that any indentured servants, “Negroes and others. . . that are willing to bear arms” could join the British Army and thus become free. Horrified, the Colonists launched an attack against Dunmore and his forces were repulsed. That didn’t

prevent many Virginian slaves from fleeing to join Dunmore’s regiment. While some state legislatures continued to refuse black enlistment, Continental Army quotas had to be filled. Resistance in New England slowly faded and by 1777 recruitment of African Americans grew. That didn’t mean it wasn’t a controversial issue in Massachusetts.

After many arguments, in October of 1777, seven months after Primus enlisted, the Massachusetts Legislature ruled that slave owners were no longer responsible for the support of their slaves if they enlisted. Freed of this burden, the legislators reasoned, owners might be more likely to grant freedom to their slaves when they joined.

Unlike enlistment in the Continental Army, local militias required service of only a few months at a time. This allowed the men to care for their farms and businesses in-between their service. With freedom finally a possibility, length of service wasn’t an issue for the black men who joined. In fact, according to Benjamin Quarles, author of *The Negro in the American Revolution*, despite the fairly low population of African Americans in the North, New England furnished more black soldiers to the Continental Army than anywhere else. In all, about 5,000 Blacks, slave and free, fought during the Revolution.

After Primus completed his three year enlistment, he joined the army again on July 3, 1781. Once the war ended, he and Dinah went on to have

five children.

In the 1790 census, Primus and his family was listed as one of four African American families in Danvers who were not servants. His occupation was not listed, however. Sadly two of Primus’ and Dinah’s children died within two months of each other. Primus Jr, husband to Jenny (Fuller) Jacobs died in May 1797 and another child, unnamed in the death records, died in July of the same year.

Perhaps this might have been the impetus for them to leave Danvers. Just before 1800, Primus and his family moved to Boston, where a thriving black community existed. He and Dinah traveled between Boston and Danvers for the rest of their lives.

Primus Jacobs died in Boston in 1817. As was common in those days, the funeral lasted nearly a week, to allow friends and acquaintances time to travel to Boston.

After Primus’ death, Dinah moved to Salem where two of her daughters, Anna Freeman and Betsey Genings, lived. She eventually settled back in Boston. When her financial situation grew desperate, Dinah filed for Primus’s pension in 1831. She collected his pension from 1831 until her death on Nov. 21, 1842.

“Our non-emancipated soldiers are almost irresistibly tempted to desert to our foes, who never fail to employ them against us. . . . It is true that they are proportionally but few in the service and yet we could rest assured, that no great misfortune . . . will arise from the want of benevolent resolves in their behalves. . . would demand the most serious attention of the Congress, respecting the political existence of enlisted Slaves, or the propriety of excluding them from being at any time employed, as soldiers or seamen in our wars.

From the October 13, 1777 Boston Gazette

Ernest Edward Mowbray, b. 1888

Ernest Edward Mowbray
Member of the 1909 Peabody
High School Baseball Team



Ernest Edward Mowbray was born in Salem on January 30, 1888, the youngest child of Richard and Sarah M. Mowbray. His older brother, Oliver, was born in 1883 and his twin sisters, Clara and Corine, in 1885.

Their father Richard was born in Maryland in February 1844. It is unknown whether he was born a slave. However, their mother, Sarah, undoubtedly was born a slave in Savannah, Georgia in 1854.

Just months after the Emancipation Proclamation, Richard Mowbray volunteered for the 4th U.S. Colored Infantry. He served from July 15, 1863 to May 4, 1866.

After the war ended, Richard and Sarah traveled north to Massachusetts. They married in 1878 and moved to Salem sometime in the 1880s where Richard worked as a janitor. The Mowbrays came to Peabody in 1901 and lived at 28 Proctor Street. While it is likely that Ernest's brother and sisters attended grammar school, Ernest was the only member of the family to pass the high school entrance examination, allowing him to attend Peabody High. He took the Latin-Scientific course and was a member of the school's baseball team, playing with Chick Davies who went on to be drafted by the Philadelphia Athletics.

After Ernest graduated in 1909, he served as Treasurer of the Salem Inter-City Social Club located on North Street. He also worked as sexton at the Tabernacle Congregational Church on Washington Street in Salem. In 1913, Ernest moved to Boston, perhaps to join his sister Clara, who had moved there two years previous.

In Boston, he worked as an assistant manager of the Hotel Melbourne on Tremont Street. He married his wife Alice sometime between 1915 to 1916, not long before he enlisted in the Army in 1917. After the war ended, his wife died and he moved in with her sister, Ella, and niece, Thelma. He had a variety of occupations, from shoe worker to machinist and lastly as a Boston City Postal Clerk.

He seems to have died sometime in the 1940s in Boston.

Peter Buxton and Other Soldiers of the Revolution

—Primus Jacobs was not alone in his quest for freedom, nor his desire to fight for it. Four other African American men from Danvers fought in the Revolution, but none as long as Primus Jacobs. Though records of their service are included in *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of The Revolutionary War* published in 1902, little else is known about them.

In 1780, Peter Buxton (1736-1797) served for a little over one month in Captain Benjamin Warren's regiment. Scipio Shaw served for almost four months in 1775 and again for several months in 1777 and in 1778. Fortune Felton (b. 1750) served for 9 months in 1779. Zachariah Bray (b. 1750) served for 6 months in 1780. After the war, Bray moved to Salem, married and had 2 daughters, Sylva and Betsy.

18th Century Advertisements From Local Newspapers

TO be sold by *Daniel King of Salem, Fethers, by the large or small Quantity, at a reasonable Rate; likewise a Negro Girl about seventeen Years of Age. Salem, Aug. 29. 1749.*

From the *Boston Evening Post*
September 18, 1749

RUN away from the Bell tavern, the 3d instant, a negro man named Pomp, 28 years old, of a middling stature, was born in Boston, speaks good English, can read tolerably well, carried away a great coat with metal buttons, a handsome hat, cut small, a dury coat 2 kersey jackets lined with red baize, a black large jacket, a lapel'd striped holland jacket, a sailor's white knotted jacket, a white holland shirt, a striped cotton and linen shirt, 2 check linen shirts, 2 woolen dices, a pair of black knit breeches, a pair of shoes, a pair of silver shoes and knee buckles. Whoever will bring said negro to the Bell tavern in Danvers, or secure him so that he may be recovered, shall have four dollars reward and all necessary charges paid by me.
Danvers, Dec. 12. ELIZABETH SYMONDS.
'Tis tho't he carried away a piece of Sprig'd Stuff.
County of Middlesex, December 1, 1776.

From *The New England Chronicle*
Dec. 26, 1775

TO BE SOLD,
A Likely, strong and healthy Negro Man, about 27 Years old, who can do all sorts of Farming Work very well. Enquire of Capt. Jonathan Gardner in Salem.

From the *Boston News-Letter*
January 6, 1737

ALL Persons who have any Demands on the Estate of Mr. PETER PUTNAM, late of Danvers, deceased, are desired to bring in their Accounts to ENOCH PUTNAM, of said Danvers, Executor to the Will of said Deceased, in order for Settlement: And all those indebted to said Estate are desired to make speedy Payment to the Executor.
A NEGRO WOMAN, about 29 Years of Age, belonging to said Estate to be sold for Want of Employ. Inquire of the Executor.

From *The Essex Gazette*
April 17, 1774

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